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ABSTRACT

Students at Hume-Fogg Academic High School in Nashville, Tennessee do every kind of writing, have won numerous writing awards, and have published everything from chapbooks to articles in national literary magazines. According to the creative writing teacher, students are first taught to write about things they know--to go back to their own childhood experiences and rediscover who they are. These writing assignments are never graded because once they are graded, they are "finished." Numerous revisions are encouraged and expected before students' writing is published. Peers participate in the reading and evaluating of students' writing. A good end-of-year assignment involves retrospection. The students look back over all their writing and then look in a mirror and ask themselves "how all this makes up the fragmented person that is me." Students then make a mask to reflect their image of themselves and write about that image. Students also write, lay out, edit, and design their own chapbooks. At the end of every semester each students completes a manuscript to be sent to "Scholastic" magazine. The sense of community in the classroom is reinforced--a sense of writing together on a shared subject or theme. Ridicule has no place in these classrooms, for students' best writing comes from an emotional center that is dangerous. (Three students' poems are attached.) (RS)

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WRITING FOR PUBLICATION

Bill Brown

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Writing for publication

Bill Brown

This year alone Bill Brown's students at Hume-Fogg Academic High School in Nashville, Tennessee, have won six 1991 National Scholastic Writing Awards, seventeen Nashville Writers' Showcase Awards, one National Foundation for the Arts Award, and one Princeton University Young Poet Award. And, with the help of a Bread Loaf in the Schools grant, they've written, edited, typed-set, laid out, and taken to the publlsher—camera ready—five publications. Recently Bill spent a couple of hours on the phone talking about how he gets his students to publish and about his new textbook, co-authored with Malcolm Glass, Important Words: A Book for Poets and Writers.

Publication in school means everything from putting things up on the wall to doing literary magazines to sending things out. We're an academic school. We do every kind of writing, and there's a strong focus on expository and critical writing as well. But most people see creative writing as exclusive and don't realize that all writing is creative and that somehow all kinds of writing support each another. I teach three creative writing classes. Sometimes there are anywhere from sixty to eighty kids signed up. Keeping up with that much on a daily basis is crazy. I also design writing programs to go with other English curriculums. I go into every freshman class for at least three to six weeks and do a creative writing unit early on in the year. I do that for sophomores again if I can. Anytime in our school that students turn in essays or other critical writing, they're supposed to come up with creative writing pieces as well, a poem, or a prose excursion or something (an extract from their journals on literature) which is given weight as well as the critical writing. So that's written into our curriculum in general.

strategies—looking back

Now how do I get kids to write for publication? The most important thing is that students need to write about things they know—which is their own experience. How to get that across to them? I have many different strategies. Our textbook (*Important Words*, Bill Brown and Malcolm Glass) starts with that, the first four chapters. The first thing I try to do is turn to an important point in childhood. I have them draw a floorplan—of the first house or home or apartment that they really have vivid memories of. I have them draw that plan in detail—everything from where the cat or dog peed on the rug, where there was an oil fire in the kitchen—looking for windows, closets, basements, things where kids might have specific emotions involved, and fears, reflective moments. Where the telephone was is really important; about a third of the kids have some type of disaster or some type of sorrow involved with when so-and-so got a call. They know where they were, they know when it was, they know the date. Almost every kid is afraid of something under the bed or out the window—or in a mirror, in a closet. Every kid was told not to play somewhere, but did. So I try to make them draw this floor plan and label it and then to take themselves on a tour—as if they were museum guides of their own childhoods—and wherever they come up with a story, mark it, even make some notes about it. (If they go right into a piece of writing because they have a narrative they need to tell, they just go right into it. They can finish the floor plan later.) Then when they're all finished with it, I want them to pick out twenty, thirty minutes for a real fast writing. I quit calling anything a free writing because no writing is free. It's all hard work. So I don't talk about that. I never tell them to write freely for ten minutes about nothing. I always place them somewhere or give them alternatives. But they're not free; they're fast writings. So I have them try to write about the floor plan—first taking a tour of that house, from room to room, giving as much detail as they can, for thirty minutes, an hour if they can, and to go back after they read it and mark places where they know there's a story or an event or a specific emotion—something funny, the feeling of fear, a feeling of nostalgia, of joy, of sorrow, and that usually is their first four to six weeks' assignments they've already given themselves. All I've done is ask them to map it out. So we write on those things. And what I do have (which I believe in incredibly, it's a time honored thing that we've all done) is emulation and modeling. I go and find previous student work. Kids emulate and model other kids' work. They look at a piece and say, "I can do that" or "Maybe I can do it better than that" or "I have an experience like that." They'll start modeling successes. And all of a sudden they're not left alone with some assignment that is done to them by a teacher. And I give them professional writers' work—who have

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looked at their childhoods, at their experiences, at the lives of their own children, parents, grandparents, and fictional characters—to show how it's been an important part of their lives. I find those that I think are best suited for the age group and for the assignment.

It's amazing how early kids can find a place, even at three and four years old. I have a lot of my own writing where I pull in places that were important to me. There was a honeysuckle thicket where I was able to crawl in like a cave. You would think it was a cave, and just be there and act out different fantasies. Closets, attics, especially where there was an attic fan, are good. Kids have everything from airplanes to spaceships involved. Almost all kids have a tree, that they either climbed or sat under. But somehow it was important to them. And they can always find it. You can see it light up in their eyes when you ask them to find it. I have them close their eyes a lot and visualize, actually film this part of their childhood. I have them collect as many photographs as they can. A chapter in the book is on photograph albums of their childhood. The Easter when they had the first dress, the new shoes. Because I have a lot of Jewish kids and kids who are Islamic as well, I learn the different holidays. It's the same with the floor plan, not every kid knew a house. Some never lived in a house. They lived in projects, in small apartments. So they're different. An apartment's hallways, stairs, laundry mats, parking lots, and playgrounds are the places that they remember—roofs. Every kid can find an experience in this, because they all have it. Most kids have dug for treasure. Richard Wilbur has a poem called "Digging for China." He comes out and you know he never made it. But he comes out exhausted and looks at the sky and says, "China, China everywhere."

So what I try to do is let kids go back to their own experiences and rediscover who they are. It is very important early on that kids understand that they own their own words, so somehow this assignment is something they're doing for themselves, not just for a teacher. I have three things to say that I think are really important. First the kids never get grades on a specific piece of writing like this because once they do, because once it's something the teacher's doing, it's finished. I have to stress there are three, four, five, eight revisions before I ever send anything off. That's very important. The second thing is if you're expecting a grade on something, immediately the grade is what it's for, and I want the kids to know that there's a publication out there that we're looking to get their work into—that there's a place to submit it, there's a contest to send it to. But the most important thing is that there are audiences outside that little, bitty classroom that make their writing important, and an audience they're writing to beyond the teacher. Third, their peers are going to share this work because the teacher can't read and evaluate everything. They're going to have to help each other decide what really works and what is good. So automatically it establishes a sense of community, which is so important to a group of writers. They're not in this alone, facing this teacher who's going to put a red mark on it. And I stress that things must be read aloud. These are not new ideas. They're all coming from Ken Macrorie, who is one of my heroes, and from James Moffett and from Don Murray.

In writing for publication, product is everything. I want them to share their work, revise it, turn in an anthology of their best works. If I give thirty assignments in a six weeks' period, I have to grade them. Grading is real whether you're a checker at Sears or a nuclear physicist. So I don't hide that. I may give them thirty assignments and I may say I want eight polished pieces. This is another Macrorie thing. I want the anthology, and that way it's not an individual piece. I'm not saying it's finished. I'm trying to give them the opportunity to succeed with their best work the way writers do and have the opportunity to fail. If kids haven't had a chance to fail, they will never succeed on a high level of writing. Their failures teach them things. One of the assignments will be to go back and find failures that they were really involved in, that they may have thought were good at first, almost latched onto because they had some type of commitment to the writing. But no one else felt there was much to it—to go back and find the center of that writing and redo it the way writers do with their work. They need to know that rejection is a real part of writing and of life in general. Also when their work comes in, the teacher's got to find something that removes it from the classroom, and that is a publication that the kids are involved with producing: a reading in a local bookstore, at a local art center, at PTA meetings, whatever, where student work becomes the performance. Bookstores are lovely for readings because they're going to have parents in there and the bookstore's going to become a family place—which is what it should be in

our country and it isn't. Libraries are good, or peer readings.

So that's what I do. I move from the house to the neighborhood to photo albums, and from photo albums to family, and I deal with eulogy right up front and then from that to animals. I went back and looked at all the different writers. Animals are an important part of their children's lives, their own childhoods, their adult lives. You know we give them funerals when we're kids. It's a way of practicing.

introspection

We have a chapter in *Important Words* called "Growing up in the Nuclear Age" where we really try to deal with the hard subjects. Two keys could turn and in thirty minutes we'd be back in the Stone Age. Every kid has nightmares that deal with that. I deal with the environment, and from there with advice instructions—hurts that kids deal with. I try to get them back into their lives in the present, not just the past. Then I do a section on introspection where kids look in the mirror. I have them thumb back through all their writing to see where they came from, what they were doing, their fiction, the characters they found, whether they were real or imagined, and their own childhoods. Then they look in the mirror and say, "How does all of this make up this fragmented person that is me?" And this works from middle school all the way to graduate school. I sometimes copy a poem by Margaret Atwood called "Paper Bag." In the poem she puts on a paper bag and makes a mask the way she did as a kid, pencilling in the eyes, the mouth, and does it so that all of a sudden at her age she wants new stories, a new repertoire of stories, words that haven't been said to come from her mouth. So I have kids bring in the Kroger sacks, Winn Dixie, whatever. I bring in thousands of crayons and scissors and sit them down in the middle of the floor and say, "Go at it. How do you feel? Let's make a bag that somehow reflects it." So we do this section on introspection, but they all know that what they're doing is finding an audience beyond the classroom.

The other thing is giving them time. These kids are making bags. I've got some kids who have made their bags. They've already written two poems. They think they're finished. Some of them aren't, and I will tell them they're not. Some of them will not make the bag but will write incredible stuff. They have the assignment in their heads, and they go directly to the assignment. But some kids may spend a week, may make the first one, fool around, laugh at it, try to write about it. It doesn't work, but in the trying to write about it suddenly an idea comes for something that might work. So that may take them two or three weeks. But they got it.

I want the product. The bags go up on the wall. They're up there right now. Some of them are magnificent. I can't even draw a stick figure, so I have a bunch of magazines for them to cut up to make collages or put poems together that represent a feeling of who they are. For some of them, the bag becomes more important than the writing. That's all right. I don't have a problem with that. It's an assignment that seniors need to write at the end of their year. It's a transition. It's really good for freshmen, too. It's a good end of the year piece where anyone is going to grow into another stage.

I don't have a thesaurus in my room. I think it's important that kids learn new words and learn to use them in context through their own experience and lives. But they must start with their own dialect. Sharing so much enriches a class. They can pick up on each other's backgrounds, syntax, and verb tenses. Good writing is kids learning to say important things in clear, honest ways so it touches someone's heart or brain or sense of humor or at least allows someone to say, "I know how that feels, but I've never said it." And the minute kids get that type of feedback, they know they're writers. That's one of the stages that's important. When they learn to see their peers as authors, they want to be authors, too. Learning to see themselves as authors is a very important thing. That's why you've got to publish, you've got to have audiences, you've got to have readings, and you've got to have multiple ways. If kids do taped readings of their own work where they use their friends reading their work, they get to hear it back, done by friends, their interpretations. That's like a playwright who gets to have a director and a group of actors play back what they saw as a vision and let it have a life of its own, outside their own private lives.

the chapbook

The last chapter in *Important Words* has to do with creating a chapbook—they produce their own books. I had to keep some coordinators at NCTE in November and in the spring from walking out with some of the ones I had only one copy of because they were saying, "How can one kid do this in a

classroom?" And I said, "With a xerox machine and money enough to buy good paper." They learn to lay it out, edit it, clip the art work, do the design—they produce a chapbook. Chapbook comes from the French meaning cheap book. A writer found a benefactor— that's what you had to do in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, so you could produce a little pamphlet of your work. Then people could see it; that's how you got to be known. They all produce a chapbook, an anthology of their own work. So they found out in a semester or a year how their work could be shaped. It works like a poem itself—maybe ten poems work as one unit either in theme, image, subject matter, chronology. If they don't want to do that, they can make a taped reading with music. They play it themselves; then they have their friends read or they read their work. So it's a fifteen or thirty minute reading of their work that really has a shape and an audience. And they make a cassette for me, or they can do a video. But they have to have one of these products. This year I did it early because I wanted to see what would happen if they started in midyear finding a shape—what would happen at the end of the year when they had to do it again. I'm just experimenting and that's important. Every class needs to feel that the teacher is not giving them the same assignments over and over again—that the teacher's not going back into the folder and pulling out the same stuff that was done twenty years ago with their mothers. I walk in and say, "I got this idea. I don't know whether it's going to work, but you are guinea pigs, and if you will help me make it work, I might turn this into an article so that other teachers can use it." All of a sudden they feel important—the audience outside the class again.

That's what I'm always pushing for. Writers have to project an audience of readers, and if it's one teacher they're out of luck. Then it's nothing they're doing for themselves and they don't own it. Years ago in a factory, I think in Connecticut or Massachusetts, these people decided if they had better lighting they would have better production. So they told all the workers that they were going to spend some money to put in better lighting so that these workers could have better vision. It would help their eyes. It was a lie. What they were looking for was production up. But they found out that even though production upped, the lighting was too expensive. They went back and told the people, "Look, this lighting is actually being harmful to you, and we're going to cut it back because we don't want to hurt you." Well, production upped again. What they found out was lighting had nothing to do with production. It was somebody doing something specifically for their benefit. If you can constantly do that—and try to make it as honest as possible for the kids, keep shifting gears especially in creative writing—it's amazing what will happen.

publishing

When it gets to the end of the first semester every kid I have will make a *Scholastic* manuscript. I tell them that we do not write to win contests. That's stupid. This is another important audience outside. To make a manuscript something perfect, to get it as perfect as it can be is an important lesson to learn because when writers send something to an editor, the scrutiny there is just incredibly tough. This may be the most valuable lesson I can teach them. I don't care whether they go on to be closet writers or writers that send work out or not. Learning to get anything right is a lesson, not just in writing, but in everything else that they do in their lives. So I want that manuscript to be perfect, and I make their groups and their pals and their friends inside the community of writing responsible for each other because I've got some who are spellers, and some who are technically correct, some who have a sense for syntax and rhythm. They learn to know these kids and learn to model them. They're learning not only to write but to critique other people's writing.

I keep the 1990 or '91, whatever, *Poetry Market* and *The Writers' Market*. Those are expensive. That's fifty bucks right there. One is twenty dollars; the other is thirty. Mine are usually a year behind because you can get them half price that way. And they're usually fairly accurate. The kids probably need to start with regional publications. Most writers need to start regional and then move out. I'll say, "But dream." I've got a bunch of Jewish kids who write a lot of ethnic stuff that is absolutely dear and wonderful about Hanukkah and the Celebration of Lights. They don't need to send that to a Christian publication. I have them look, and when they're ready I have them come to me with more than one poem—maybe three manuscripts, three to four pieces a manuscript. So they may have twelve pieces (maybe out of thirty) that they feel good about. And I have to warn them, "You're going to want to pick your last work

because it's the closest to you. And you're tired of the other stuff. But the early work may be the thing that has the biggest audience; it may be the tightest. So I want to see it all. I want you to clean it up. You've got to get it the way you want it to look on the page. You've got to have your name and address and phone number in the upper, upper left hand corner or stamped on the back of every page. If there's a two-page manuscript, you've got to have break or no break at the bottom of the page so the editor knows how to interpret it." That's a lesson. That's what they have to do. I want that done right. They spread these out on the table for me—all of the poems, all twelve. We'll go through and pick groupings that I think work. I suggest publications—because I'm a writer. I've got five or six manuscripts out right now—and I tell them I have enough rejection notes to paper a wall. Writing is not particularly successful to them as far as getting good feedback. But there's one thing that writers do: They live examined lives. They may not be overhappy lives, but you know who you are and what your experience is better than other people. And that is valuable as a human being. It just is. I will go through and say, "This publication likes to have several different types of writing, so you may send one abstract image poem, a narrative poem, a poem that tells a story that is very personal. This publication wants artsy stuff so we're going to look for a poem that is surreal—stuff that I would not normally let you get away with, but this publication likes that. Most of your friends like it even though they can't tell you what it means." There may be an audience for that, but I don't encourage that at all. But we go through the work. And we laugh. Then I say, "OK, take a risk with this one. You pick a place. If it's got a three on it, that means it's like *New York Times*, or *Poetry*, or *Ploughshares*, or one of the big ones. And that's stupid to send there. Why would you do that?"

They prepare the manuscript, and they send them out. I teach them how to get the spacing right. I teach them the realities. These are life messages. Also they learn instead of sending once to *Scholastic*, here they are sending five times, ten times. You'll be surprised. I already have several people accepted in *ART/LIFE* out in California, *Z Miscellaneous* out of New York. But there are a lot of ways to publish. Postcards are great. You can buy card stock (it only costs ten cents apiece). Have kids lay it out, use high quality xerox, black and white pencil with poetry.

communities

Some kids can't write in class. Learning to be a writer is learning how you write, and when, and where. If the kids learn to set it up so they know when to write, that's great. Even though I think, periodically, a creative writing teacher looking for a publication has got to come in two or three times a six weeks and say, "The first three days of this week—I'm going to warn you now—starting Monday, we're going to put everything else you're doing aside and write in class, so you're going to have to get that on your calendar." I think it's important to write as a community together, as Ken Macrorie would have us do. Special things happen when we write together. That sense of community has to be reinforced over and over again, and not just a sense of critiquing and sharing, but a sense of writing together on a shared subject or theme or idea. I always give them three or four ideas in a lesson, never just one. That's the one thing Macrorie got on to me about several years ago when I tried some of these ideas out with him. He said, "What if a kid has never had insomnia?" I said, "Well, he can create the act of sleeplessness or the idea." And he just said, "Well, I'm not buying that." So I always have three or four ideas, and always tell the kids if there's something right on the top of their heads that's important to them—that is what's going to come out anyway. And if they try to force my assignment when their dad just lost a job, I'm an asshole. They might want to write me a note on the piece when it's finished to say, "Remember this assignment. This is what I needed to write about. This is what came out." I'm doing what Ken calls good writing—honesty. He says it doesn't matter whether it's a lie or not, but it's whether you're honest about it or not.

I don't care whether it's a college or a middle school, and I do workshops everywhere, I tell them ridicule has no a place in my classroom and if I find it, they're out of there. They'll be reading their work to a brick in the wall somewhere. Once you set up that stricture, they're all so glad to hear you say it, whether they tell you or not, because our best writing comes from an emotional center that is dangerous. You have to care about something for it to turn out good. Or you can't write about a parent's divorce, a pet that got killed, the death of a grandparent, or someone who did something to you and didn't apologize. If they can't write about these things with honesty, then they'll never write anything that's worth reading—that doesn't have an emotional center. You have to start there.❑

Vampires at Midnight

In my bedroom
Every night
With the moon
Making shadows
With its silver light,
I lay in my bed
With the sheets
Pulled up to my chin
To protect my neck
From the vampires.

I knew they were there.
They came through the hole
That was boarded up
In the back of my closet.
Behind that hole in my closet
There was a bare room
With only small table
And a few chairs
Clustered around it.
In that room
Lived ghosts
And vampires
That played poker
Until it got dark.
And then they came out
For me.

As I lay in bed
Holding my breath,
Waiting,
I reasoned in my mind
That the vampires
And the ghosts
Would see my sister first
And they would kill her;
They wouldn't even know
I was there.
And with that reassurance,
I slept.

Carolyn Koch

Father

It used to be I would wait an
extra hour at your store so I could
ride home with you.
We'd stop by McDonald's and listen
to a sports talk show.
If we disagreed on who was
going to win a game, we'd bet.
You made it fun to win,
cause you acted like losing a
dollar really bothered you.
"Every dog has its day in the sun,"
your frowning face would say,
as you threw a wrinkled up dollar at me.
Sometimes I'd test your strength
by hitting you and then running away.
You'd catch me and put me in a "pickle."
You'd roll me up into a ball where
I couldn't move my hands or legs.
Usually I was crammed in the corner of
the couch with my face pressed against
the cushion. "Mom!" I would scream
hoping she would come and tell you to free
me.
You'd take me across the street
to the field and pitch baseballs to me.
Snowball fights in the winter
were great even though you always won.
The one good shot that hit your
face or the back of your head,
made my entire week.
All that's past now.
We may watch a football game on
T.V., but that's about it.
I call you "Old fat guy," and
you call me "Young nerd."
You say you can't wait for me
to leave so you'll have another room,
while I say I can't wait to go.
Neither one of us can tell the
other, "I love you."
We probably never will.
The understanding is there, though.
I say, "You're wrong old, fat guy."
You say, "What does a young nerd know."

I slap your shoulder
and we go our separate ways.

Kenny Hirt

Old Man Jacob

Old man Jacob,
you walked,
cane in hand,
over that bridge
for the last twenty years
of your life.
Everyday,
damn the weather,
you made that trip downtown
to the post office.
But one day
the mail went unanswered.

The paper said they found your body
snagged on a tree
five miles down Harpeth river,
near Wheaton,
floating in the water
you danced in as a child.

Jacob,
what's drowning like?

No one heard
your silent screams
as you choked
on each new breath,
gaping mouth
and eyes.
Did you see the light
above you,
reflected on
your upturned face,
feel the numbness
settle on your brain
like a summer's heat?
Did you let yourself go,
give the current
your poor body
for its amusement,
feel your spirit
shed its husk
and fly away?

Shaun Brown